

What “authentic” actually means in marketing

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Emmy Liederman The word "authentic," a frequent guest on conference stages, January 14, 2026
LinkedIn posts, and creative briefs, has become unavoidable marketing jargon. And its meaning grows vaguer by the day.

Marketers may use the term to reject all the things they don't want to be, like dishonest or out-of-touch, which is especially relevant at a time when consumer trust is delicate.

“With the rise of AI-generated content, comment bot farms, fake reviews, and misinformation, consumers are more fluent and less forgiving than ever,” said Ivy Everitt, connections supervisor of social at VML.

Like any buzzword, the overuse of “authenticity” clouds its meaning. Whether marketers reject the word or stick by it, they agree it's pervasive. Here's how marketers define, recognize, and apply it.

What authenticity looks like

Marketers define "authenticity" in messaging as a clear acknowledgment of consumer needs that shows the brand has done its research.

“Authentic marketing feels effortless,” said Ashley Mann, chief operating officer and cofounder of PR and communications company The Colab. “I think the best campaigns position the user or customer as the hero and actually don't focus on the brand itself.”

Many marketers believe centering consumers isn't enough to build an authentic campaign. For marketing to feel honest, marketers must earn the right to speak to their audience's needs.

“When brands speak as if they already understand people's lives, pain, or motivations, audiences feel managed instead of met,” said Feleceia Benton Wilson, executive director of brand strategy at LERMA. “Inauthentic marketing often sounds confident but feels transactional.”

Apple's long-running “Shot on iPhone” spot earns the authenticity title by focusing on human talent over product specs, said Nicolas Spiro, chief commercial officer at Viral Nation.

“This campaign feels authentic because it celebrates the consumer's creativity, not the brand's engineering,” he said.



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What consumer interruption looks like

Inauthentic marketing on social overlaps with what consumers find cringe-worthy, a title earned when brands jump on a trend without reason.

“(Inauthenticity) can often occur if you sanitize a trend so much from its original form, so that the corporate team finds it palatable, that it now means nothing,” said Jacquie Kostuk, Group Strategy Director at FUSE Create. Brands often invest in creator partnerships to avoid that disconnect while also learning more about their consumer, which helps to avoid future creative missteps.

“These creators are the experts in their own micro cultures, so leaning on them for ideation or stress-pointing an idea ensures the brand is actually adding value to the community, rather than just crashing the party,” said influencer marketing expert Lindsey Gamble.

Vaseline’s “Vaseline Verified”

In March, Vaseline created a compilation of consumer use cases to highlight the product's versatility while recruiting scientists to determine which hacks were safe and which were dangerous.

“What made it authentic was that they didn’t create a trend themselves or try to come up with their own Vaseline Hacks,” said Gamble. “They tapped into an existing internet culture and made the community the focal point of the campaign as opposed to the brand itself.”



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Winning audience approval

The shelf life of a campaign can indicate its authenticity, said Jessy Grossman, founder of Women in Influencer Marketing

“You can usually tell it was perceived well when you notice a lot of shares happening, especially with additional commentary,” she said. “People are going to elaborate on and continue an authentic conversation.”

But that doesn't mean creativity needs to be understood and loved by everyone. When campaigns scale, they can sometimes lose the initial charm or resonance that made them feel authentic in the first place.

"A brand should really think about whether their insight is meant for scale or for this core audience, and manage their media appropriately," Tiffany Hardin, founder and CEO of Gild Creative Group.

Timmy's Zoom call

To promote the recent film "Marty Supreme," production company A24 and lead actor Timothée Chalamet created a fake marketing Zoom call that satirizes the self-indulgence of creative teams.

"It never felt like the brand was chasing attention," said Everitt. "It felt like they understood the conversation they were stepping into and earned their place in it."



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Authentic marketing doesn't require universal adoration, mass attention, or the urgency of the sales pitch.

"In practice, authentic work doesn't rush to persuade," Benton Wilson said. "It tells the truth, leaves tension unresolved, and trusts the audience enough to decide what it means for them."

Buzzwords like "authenticity" can make for vague statements or strategies, and content that is truly authentic might not even require that declaration.

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